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# What Will We Eat Today?

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# Encouraging Good Eating

You can be sure that your child will eat when he is hungry—even if he doesn't eat as much as you would like.

Your job is to provide nutritious foods that promote good health. Your child should then be allowed to decide how much and even whether or not to eat.

◆ Encourage good eating by providing appealing meals and snacks in a form your child can handle (such as small pieces for finger feeding, or soft foods that don't take a lot of chewing).

◆ For a toddler, plan three meals and healthy snacks so that she eats every two or three hours. As she grows older, the times between eating can become longer. You'll need to make adjustments in how much food you serve and how often. You will also want to set some limits. (For example, you won't want to allow a snack right before mealtime for an older preschooler.) You can also help your child have a healthy appetite by making sure she gets regular activity.

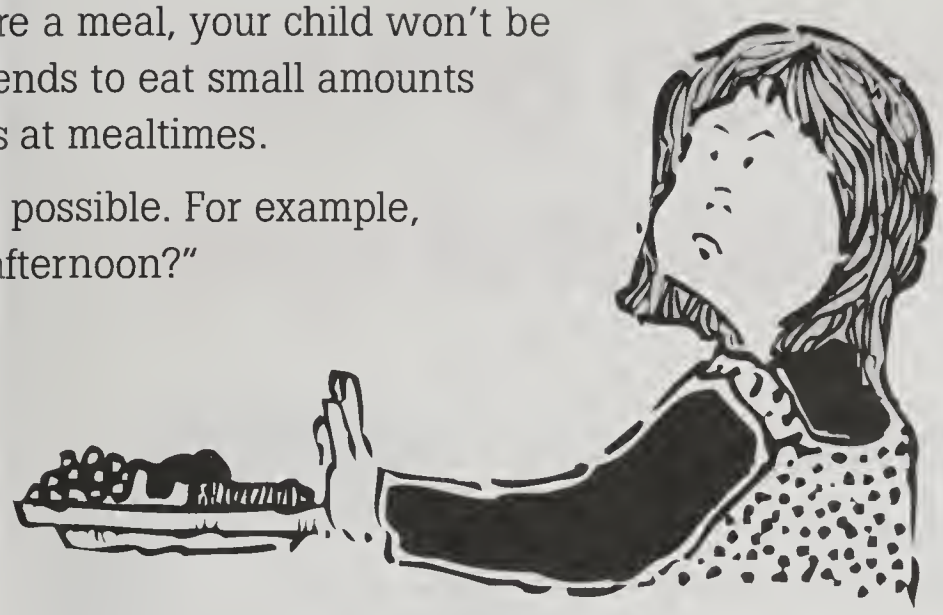
◆ Serve child-size portions that your child can finish before getting too full. A good rule is one level tablespoon of food for each year of age. (So, for example, a 3-year-old would get three tablespoons each of several different healthy foods.) Your child may resist if you serve more than he thinks he can eat. Start small—you can always give a second helping if he eats the first.

# If Your Child Refuses to Eat

**If your child frequently just won't eat, keep these tips in mind:**

● Do not force your child to eat if she does not seem hungry. A child who is going through a time of slow growth or who has been inactive or ill may not be hungry.

- Plan snacks carefully. If a snack is eaten too close before a meal, your child won't be hungry when the mealtime comes. Even for a child who tends to eat small amounts throughout the day, try to concentrate the biggest portions at mealtimes.
- Offer your child choices about what he eats as often as possible. For example, ask, "Do you want an apple or grapes for your snack this afternoon?"
- Be a good example. Children are great imitators, and they watch what you do—so eat your carrots!
- Be aware that even with your best efforts, there may be times when your child just doesn't eat. This is not unusual for preschoolers. If it only happens from time to time, you need not worry.



## What to Avoid

**To help your child learn to eat in a healthy way, remember these guidelines:**

- Avoid using food as a pacifier or to reward behavior. Avoid coaxing, begging, or making a game of mealtime. Do provide a pleasant setting, and eat with your child.
- Avoid offering too much liquid, like juice or milk, during a meal. The liquid may fill your child's stomach, leaving no room for food.
- Avoid rushing through meals. It takes 20 minutes for the brain to tell the body that it has been fed. Children who eat slowly are less likely to overeat.

## Making Mealtimes Good Times

**Mealtime should be a pleasant experience for both adults and children.**

Although busy schedules can make it difficult, try to plan meals so that your child does not eat alone. Include your child in pleasant conversation while you are having a meal together. This will help create a feeling of warmth, love, and security. Eliminate distractions, including TV, and focus instead on the meal. Children who share mealtimes with others are more likely to eat the right amounts of food and even to digest their food better.

These ideas will help make your mealtimes enjoyable and will help your child learn how to act while eating:

- Have the meal ready when your child comes to the table; if she has to wait, she will entertain herself by playing.
- Teach rules for good manners, but don't be too strict: for example, young children cannot be expected to sit perfectly still.
- Encourage the use of spoon, fork, and knife as your child grows and develops.
- Watch for good manners and praise them.
- Keep mealtime pleasant. Don't allow arguing or scolding, and use a firm voice without shouting to give instructions.

## Letting Children Help

**Children will be more interested in eating when they are involved in mealtime jobs.**

Be adventurous, and let your child do tasks that he is ready for. Children who are 2 and 3 years old can help you with these jobs and many others:

- Help clear dishes from the table, especially their own (but be careful about breakable or heavy items)
- Wipe tables and countertops
- Wash fruits and vegetables
- Place garbage in the trash
- Mix ingredients together
- Open packages

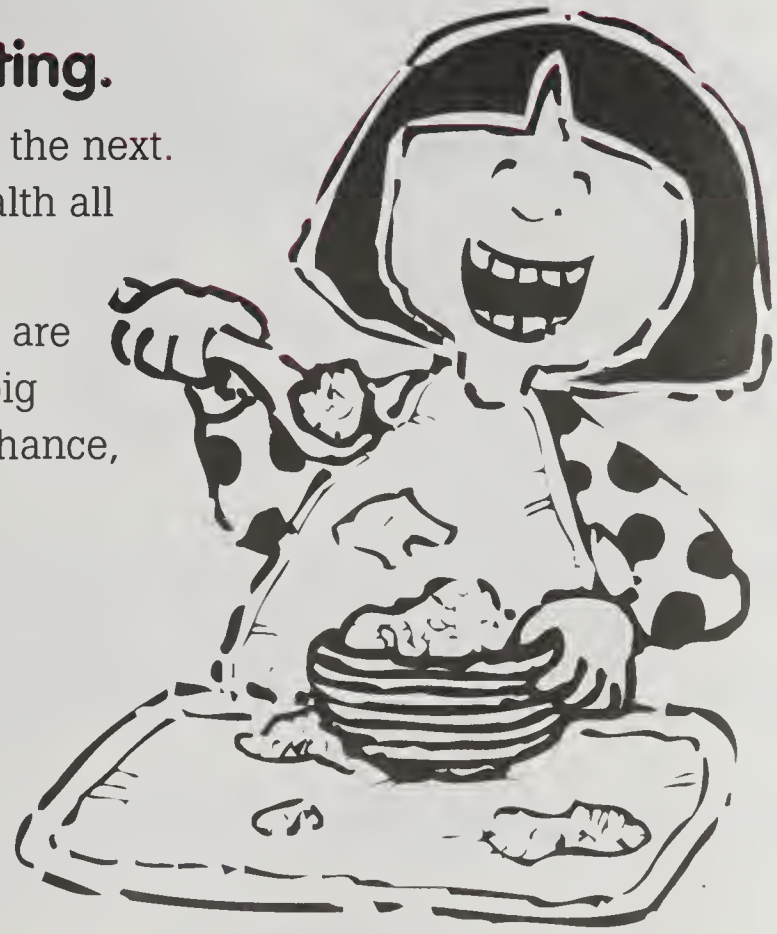
Be sure you always supervise your child in these jobs, and make sure that any dangerous items are out of reach. Choose tasks that match your child's abilities, and show her what to do when she is learning. Make clean-up a part of the job. Wearing an apron keeps clothes clean, and washing hands before touching food and dishes is important.

# Young children, like all of us, eat because they get hungry.

## But they also express feelings through their eating.

It is common for a child's appetite to vary from one meal or one day to the next. How fast your child is growing, how active she is, and her general health all affect how much she will eat.

Children differ in their needs for food and their feelings about it. Some are hearty eaters, while others are very picky. Some children always eat big meals; others eat small amounts often throughout the day. Given the chance, most children do a good job of eating the food they need.



## What You Can Expect

**Children often resist tasting new foods. Try offering something new early in the meal, when your child is most hungry.**

Do not force a new food, but do offer it more than once. (You may need to offer as many as 10 times before your child will try a taste!) Another tip is to give a new food together with an old favorite.

Though children may turn away from new foods, they do like variety. Serve fruits, vegetables, milk, meat, cheese, cereals, breads, and desserts in child-size portions (though not all of these in one meal!).

All children are messy eaters, and they spill often. Learning table manners and how to use forks and spoons neatly takes time. Buy child-size utensils that are easier to manage, and use plastic cups to avoid breaking glass. Also, make sure the area around the table is safe, and avoid using expensive items that your child could damage easily. Be patient, and set a good example with your own eating habits.

"Food jags"—demanding the same few foods day after day—are common among children 18 months to 3 years old. Your child may want noodles for breakfast, noodles for lunch, and noodles for dinner. Again, be patient, even if you get bored serving the same food. The situation usually changes in a few weeks. Don't fight your child's favorites—just be sure to offer other foods as well.

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# Books to Read

Reading books with you about food and eating may help your child try new foods or get more interested in mealtime. Check with your public library or local bookstore for these books:

*Gregory, the Terrible Eater,* by Mitchell Sharmat (Four Winds Press, 1980).

*The Carrot Seed,* by Ruth Krauss (Scholastic, 1945).

*Stone Soup,* by Marsha Brown (Scribner's, 1947).

*Too Much Junk Food,* by Stan and Jan Berenstain (Random House, 1986).

*Green Eggs and Ham,* by Dr. Seuss (Random House, 1960). (This book talks about trying new foods.)

If you'd like more information about helping your child learn how to eat healthy, look for these books:

*A Healthy Head Start,* by Mary Abbott Hess, Anne E. Hunt, and Barbara M. Stone. (Holt, 1990).

Satter, Ellyn. *How to Get Your Kid to Eat . . . But Not Too Much* (Bull Publishing, 1987).

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